BUILDING STAKEHOLDERS' RELATIONS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: THE QUALITY CHALLENGES AT PLAY

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ABSTRACT: *Building stakeholders' relations in ODL has the potential to release untapped potential and transfer of expertise through collaboration. However, there are some sticking challenges at play and this study examined these challenges to building stakeholder' relations in ODL. This was a qualitative study. Information was collected through a survey of four regional campuses informed by a purposive sample of 284 students and sixty members of staff. Some very glaring challenges in the way of building stakeholders' relations in ODL were unearthed. Suppressed voices working to scare away potential partners were seen as inhibitors and silent assassins of efforts to building stakeholders' relations in ODL. There were far more damaging attitudes to ODL stakeholder relations than those that promote it. Some of the manifestations of these damaging attitudes were seen through the otherness of ODL institutions and their students, the low status accorded to ODL and the inherent belief that learning equals face-to-face teaching. The invisible hand of power from a close knit highly conservative old boys' clique from conventional universities was visible in this study. The study concluded that ODL cannot therefore fulfil its purpose of building stakeholders' relations without reference to these challenges some of which are inflicting shock and injury to the staff and students. The study thus, recommended a re-thinking on conditions building stakeholders' relations in ODL considering that this issue is more than an academic argument about definitions of meaning. It is the question of who gets what from the paymaster's limited pot and why (Doherty, 2008).*

KEYWORDS: Stakeholder, Open and Distance Learning, Education, Quality Control

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

According to the National Knowledge Commission (2013), the open and distance education system is a crucial vehicle in the sustained development of a knowledge society. Its potential for flexible education delivery, scope for self and life-long learning and cost effectiveness make it instrumental in meeting the needs of individual and communities at this juncture - in the rapid transition being made from the industrial to the information age. This means building stakeholders' relations should be prioritised in this vibrant knowledge sector that is growing in prominence. This stance is supported by Ipsos MORI (2009) who argues that sstakeholder management has long been recognised as a central part of an organisation's effectiveness. This is because stakeholders play important roles as advocates, sponsors, partners and agents of change in any organisation and it is foolhardy to ignore such critical elements of the organisation. Much has been written about stakeholder relationships in the private sector and many companies now have dedicated relationship managers and strategies in place to improve and develop external relationships. However, stakeholder relations in open and distance learning appear to experience some challenges because it is often haphazardly done and hence, still lags some way behind other institutions.

To Hemmati and Gardiner (2002) education is an essential building block in stakeholder relations that promote sustainability. This cannot be achieved without solving the prevailing problem of education inequity. It has to be pointed out that to meet modern demands of stakeholder management, information, communication and education are the pillars on which stakeholder relations is supported (OUT, 2012). In order to achieve this target, tremendous amount of expansion of higher education would be necessary. However, the prohibitive costs of providing higher education using conventional means are unsustainable especially in developing countries of Africa (Parker, 2009). Open and Distance Learning (ODL) may be a supplementary approach to fulfil the target through its more flexible and liberal yet quality programmes (Gogoi and Hazarika, 2011). This requires a radical overhaul of the higher education system, with regard to access, enrolment and most importantly, quality. Failure to address this need and foster more inclusive growth will adversely affect ODL's future and stakeholder relations will suffer. With it will be the economic prospects and the welfare of all our citizens. This paper argues that this crisis in higher education gives us the necessary impetus for radical change in stakeholder management in the context of open and distance education.

According to the National Knowledge Commission (2013), existing 'brick and mortar' campuses alone cannot cope with the current and future demand for higher education, given the limited resources for their construction and management. Even so, it is imperative that the state provides and commits to universal access to higher education. Open and distance education (ODE), enabled and delivered through information and communication technology (ICT), holds the promise to address questions of access and provide new, alternative forms of capacity building. This is because distance education has been viewed internationally as a viable option for improving access to, and the equity and quality of, basic education in various settings (McQuaide 2009). Thus, distance education programmes are growing. The growth is expected to continue over the next five years with estimates placing the number of students taking online classes in 2014 at over 18.5 million students (Nagel, 2009). Further, distance education is used as a tool to support and supplement conventional educational programmes (Perraton, 1997). As the future of open and distance learning rests on sustainable stakeholder management principles, it is imperative that this important area is given due recognition because distance education is sufficiently well placed to play a pivotal role in this regard.

Zimbabwe Open University is an open and distance-teaching university established by an act of parliament-the Zimbabwe Open University Act (1999). It started in 1993 as a College of the University of Zimbabwe initially to train teachers and heads of schools in educational management. At its peak, with an enrolment of about 21 000 students (Strategic Plan 2010-2015), it is arguably the second biggest university in Southern Africa after UNISA in terms of student numbers. The university offers various programmes of learning in four faculties. According to Khan (2008), the outcome of higher education translates into the creation of both physical and social capital. To Khan (2008), optimally apportioned quality and quantity of each of the two broad forms of capital ensures sustainable development of a society and is key to stakeholder satisfaction. The institutions of higher learning, specifically in the modern world, are universally considered to be the service industries responsible for continuous supply of brains sensitised to the dynamic needs of society to create and reform the physical and social capital (Khan, 2008).

Open Universities the world over are in the business of promoting a paradigm shift in the provision of education (Allen and Seaman 2008; Knowles and Kalata 2007 & Nagel 2009). A good example is the Open University of Indonesia (Universitas Terbuka). In the university's Strategic Plan for 2005-2020, the university set out to expand opportunities for quality higher

education throughout the distance education system and produce competent academics and professionals who are able to compete globally (Setijorini and Adnan (2008). Zimbabwe Open University, whose vision is to become a 'world class university', took lessons from the Universitas Terbuka and now accepts that stakeholder relations is its core business. This is one reason why the university is in the forefront for moving 'knowledge frontiers for sustainable development'. Khan (2008) posits that since the last quarter of 20th century, reformers have universally begun to recognize the uncomfortable reality that social function of higher education has been alarmingly compromised by the failure of many institutions to pay attention to the needs of their stakeholders.

The Zimbabwe Open University shares some of the concerns of stakeholder relations and is working flat out to cement these. Its programmes are geared to support this focus. It has a vibrant ICT directorate that has been put in place to modernise means of communicating with stakeholders. These ICT enabled linkages that are propelled by broadband and satellite networks - are of a new, unprecedented kind, with special implications in a globalised world. This idea is supported by National Knowledge Commission (2013) who argues that ICT enabled linkages that are found in open and distance teaching institutions give rise to the 'A-3' scenario, where Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere can be connected to others through networks and access devices in a virtual space. This facilitates new forms of organisations and communities, often constituted by the users themselves, and manifested in myriad ways – for example through wiki, blogs, social networks, open resource movements, virtual institutes etc. In working together, these groups and organisations create new resources and ways of empowerment in virtual and real spaces. Khan (2008) argues that the time has come for historians to admit that the mass access to formal higher education in the period following World War Two (WWII) appears to have worked as a double edged sword: although accessibility of higher education to masses has led to unprecedented technological growth by uncapping wider human potentialities, the associated developments in sociological and environmental realms have raised serious sustainability issues. Thus, what is needed is a cultural shift towards stakeholder satisfaction and Zimbabwe Open University is known for having programmes that produce graduates who use innovative and creative methods that will bring about effective changes in the ailing socio-political system for sustainable development (Chiome, 2011b). ZOU also intends to produce graduates with capacity to manage change and compete on the global arena (ZOU, 2010). However, the role of the Zimbabwe Open University appears to be blurred in this area as the skills, knowledge and attitudes used by these critical professionals need to be appreciated. Society need to acknowledge that quality and sustainable development are some of the core values of an open and distance learning university.

Zambia has also made strides in changing the education landscape by reaching disadvantaged communities through distance education. However, a study by Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008) unearthed constraints and impediments in the way. Open and distance learning need to produce quality products that are competitive on the world stage and can lead transformation and sustainable development (Siaciwena and Lubinda 2008; Gogoi and Hazarika, 2011). These important points raised by Siaciwena and Lubinda (2008) in the context of the Zambian experience must be used as a guiding torch by the Zimbabwe Open University in its quest to produce quality graduates and satisfy the needs of its stakeholders in the process. The issues of open and distance learning and stakeholder collaborations in developing countries are an under-researched and under-reported area (Perraton, 1997). Most international attention has been focused on open universities providing higher education. Against this backdrop, this research set forth to unravel the quality challenges at play in building stakeholder' relations in ODL.

Statement of the Problem

Open and Distance Education is a vibrant knowledge sector. It is gaining prominence internationally and its future looks bright. However, as ODL prepares to face the knowledge challenges of the 21st century, stakeholder relations appear to be threatened by attitudes towards open and distance learning and this presents a rather dismal picture for the future.

Objectives of the Study

This study set to examine the quality challenges at play in building stakeholder' relations in an ODL environment.

Research Question

This research has been guided by the question:

What quality challenges are at play in building stakeholder relationships in the open and distance education contexts?

METHODOLOGY

This research was a survey of four regional campuses of the Zimbabwe Open University. It was informed by a purposive sample of 284 students and sixty members of staff. An open ended questionnaire was used to gather qualitative data. Thus, this research is in the qualitative paradigm.

RESULTS

This study unearthed suppressed voices of quality working as silent assassins of quality and stakeholder relations in an open and distance teaching environment. These are discussed below.

Suppressed voices working as silent assassins of quality

An interesting finding of the study is that 53 (88%) staff and 230 (81%) student respondents believe that there are suppressed voices in open and distance learning that negatively affects stakeholder relations and ultimately quality. The resultant responses appeared to be too loud to ignore since what is perceived as lack of quality in open and distance teaching institutions may be nothing more than damaging attitudes towards open and distance learning. The study resulted in unearthing some major missing links that appeared to be suppressed voices of quality in ODL. These act as stakeholder relations inhibitors. They have been labelled *silent assassins of quality and stakeholder relations* by one respondent. Their direct consequence according to the other respondent is the *stead loss of motivation to improve quality and sustainable stakeholder relations in an open and distance learning context*.

Entrenched mental models: Damaging attitudes towards ODL

An important finding from 200 (70%) of students and 50 (83%) of staff unearthed by this study was the damaging attitudes towards ODL. These were seen as affecting values and practices in the university. There were far more damaging attitudes to quality than those that promote it. These statements were extracted from the questionnaires and may be just a tip of the ice bag:

> *The need is there to change attitudes values and practices that have become reutilised.*

> *Some damaging attitudes are destroying the image of open and distance teaching institutions. These must be discarded.*

Research has shown that on average, most countries allocate just 0,002 of their national budget to ODL despite the great strides it has made in increasing access to quality education across the globe (Siaciwena, 2011). Kleijnen et al, (2011) opines that quality management is a delicate process that is subject to competing values and strong ambivalences. In this regard, its effects in terms of improvement of educational quality are controversial. It appears this was the case with stakeholder relations unearthed in this study.

The otherness of open and distance learning

The otherness of open and distance learning, its students and its staff is damaging all the very good work that is going into management of stakeholder relations in an open and distance education context [34 staff (57%) and 119 students (42%)]. Faced with this kind of construction, one regional campus in this study lost 15 (60%) of staff to a conventional university in a space of two years. They left an open and distance teaching university not because there was no quality but in order to shrug off the otherness tag hovering over open and distance learning institutions. Only one staff member who was on a temporary contract in the conventional university transferred in the opposite direction. Thus, respondents in this study agreed that:

> *There appears to be construction of ODL as other; construction of the staff in ODL as other and construction of the students in ODL as other.*

From these findings, it means that society that is looking at ODL to satisfy its 21st century educational requirements is now at pains to understand what is going on. As a result of the damaging attitudes society is instead confronted and experiencing stead loss of motivation to improve education for the 21st century. Society cannot trust ODL to lead its future when there appears to be manifestations of construction of the ODL system, the staff in ODL and ODL students as other. Siaciwena (2011) agrees and says ODL is considered inferior in most circles and for this reason it is under-funded. As Law (1997) argues, distance learning may seem to offer attractive short-term gains – but student success and course/institutional credibility rest on the resolution of fundamental and longer-term quality issues such as the otherness tag hovering above ODL.

This otherness tag emanates from conservatives who fail to appreciate that learning paradigms are changing. Brown (2006) posits that learning paradigms are already starting to shift beyond the changes experienced in the 20th century in terms of the role of teaching and learning. While the role of the teacher first shifted from ''teaching'' to ''learning facilitation'', the latest shift is towards ''facilitated and supported enquiry''. Soloway (cited in Tarawneh, 2011), for

example, argues that inquiry into authentic questions generated from student experiences is now the central strategy for teaching. Therefore contemporary educational paradigms where ODL is in the driving seat focus not only on the production of knowledge, but are beginning to focus more and more on the effective application/integration/manipulation/etc. of existing information and knowledge (Brown, 2006). Unfortunately this has not been the case in this study where ODL is being sidelined in favour of conventional systems.

The most detrimental part was that of *the otherness of the university* coming from society. There are also researchers who argue that while universities can and do make a difference in terms of quality and stakeholder relationships, what they can achieve is partial and limited because educational institutions are also part of the wider society, subject to its norms, rules and influences (Mortimore, 1997). In some studies in schools, Reynolds and Packer (1992) painted a gloomier picture when they alleged that schools have an independent of only 8-15% on student outcomes. Modern science in early modern Europe was born not without a struggle (Giddy, 2012). The poor attitudes affecting stakeholder relations could be addressed through sensitisation, orientation, and the provision of tool kits that help users to study at a distance (Chiome, 2011a). The public-at-large could be informed about the benefits of distance education in spearheading sustainable development. It is not only cost-effective but also enables people to study where they live and to contribute to their families and communities as they study (Basaza, Milman and Wright (2010). In the words of Mbizvo (2011) 'ODL has a distinct advantage in that it reaches out to all levels of society and tackles geographical challenges in education' (Mbizvo, 2011, p. 5)

Life in a marginalised university

Several respondents in this study [131 (46%) of students and 43 (72%) staff] lamented the kind of life they lived in what one respondent labelled *a marginal university*. Another respondent indicated that her parents had pre-conceptions regarding distance education. She indicated that:

> *'They consistently discouraged me telling me to go to a better conventional university.'*

Another respondent who is a PhD student said she failed to get a PhD place at a prominent conventional university where her husband was teaching at the time of study. The reason given by the husband was that:

 'You are a product of an upper top.' Apparently 'upper top' refers to rural day secondary schools that are notorious for sub standard education brought about by lack of adequate educational resources. The following excerpt from the questionnaire sums this issue:

> *ODL is certain to fail to impart skills, knowledge and attitudes that will result in stakeholder satisfaction if left on the periphery and treated as a marginal activity.*

What these highly acclaimed professionals fail to appreciate is that the world is moving from knowledge management to sense making. According to Brown, (2006) an emerging paradigm shift within management and information sciences suggests that the focus should in future shift from knowledge management to sense making. Snowden (2005, p. 16) describes sense making as:

. . .the way that humans choose between multiple possible explanations of sensory and other input as they seek to conform the phenomenological with the real in order to act in such a way as to determine or respond to the world around them.

He then continues to say that sense making is about ensuring cognitive effectiveness in information processing in order to gain a cognitive edge or advantage. This trend makes a lot of sense when we think about the difficulties we all experience in our daily work and life due to the abundance of information and interaction that requires us to apply new skills in order to manage our environments meaningfully (Brown, 2006).

Deep-seated prejudices against distance education

This study further unearthed that there are deep-seated prejudices against distance education curtailing its capacity to satisfy the needs of its stakeholders [(staff, 37 (62 %) and students 150; (53%)]. These then cascades to students and staff. Some supporting statements were:

> *The association of distance education with the less privileged contribute considerably to its low status in university rankings.*

> *The low status of distance education is demonstrated as much by its absence from some universities as by its presence in others.*

> *In terms of funding, ODL is neglected. It is accorded inferior status.*

These assertions that all the work to spruce up stakeholder collaborations through ODL is seen as peripheral activities were damaging all the good work going on. The low status given to distance education emanates from the fact that many people fail to appreciate what it really is. It is vibrant and in sync with 21st Century skill requirements. According to Moore (1997) it has been pointed out that in any educational programme, even in face-to-face education, there is some transactional distance. Seen in this way, distance education is a subset of the universe of education, and distance educators can draw on, and contribute to, the theory and practice of conventional education. Nevertheless, in what we normally refer to as distance education, the separation of teacher and learner is sufficiently significant that the special teaching-learning strategies and techniques they use can be identified as distinguishing characteristics of this family of educational practice (Moore, 1997). Furthermore, according to Ural (2007) campus-based traditional universities have difficulty in providing a good quality education due to overcrowded classrooms. As a result, to lighten the capacity load of traditional universities, distance education lectures can be part of the solution (Ural, 2007). Gogoi and Hazarika (2011) further point out that it has been found in their study in India that the present scenario of the level of awareness and attitude of the college students towards ODL system is not very encouraging. One will find that under the circumstances, unless the students are aware about the merits and accessibility of the ODL system and form a healthy attitude towards it, it will not be possible to build sustainable stakeholder' relations.

We must embrace what the National Knowledge Commission (2013) emphasised. They claim that the biggest challenge faced in higher education, is the provision of *quality higher education* to the greatest number of students, at the lowest possible cost to the learner. And this is where ICT enabled open and distance education has significant advantages that far outweigh those of the brick and mortar campuses. Using ICT effectively for higher education can bridge the distance between the learner, instructor and the market by transcending barriers of space and

time. Seamless access, flexible schedules, quality content and inclusive delivery mechanisms have enormous potential to increase the scale of access and, in that process, bring down the cost of higher education for the individual learner (National Knowledge Commission, 2013).

Learning equals face to face interaction

The assertion that how can a teaching/ learning process that deviates so markedly from what has been practiced for hundreds of years embody quality education?' (American Federation of Teachers (AFT), 2000:7) was also confirmed in this study [(27 staff 45% and 148 students 52%)], if these statements are anything to go by.

> There are still people who believe that learning is like a person standing in front of a room stuffing information into students like grain into a hen.

> Some people laughed at me thinking that to learn is the same as spoon feeding.

> My friends think face to face is the best way of learning. They say there are too many possibilities, too little time and to little investments in distance education that will not match the same time same place initiatives.

As respondents in this study grapples with building stakeholder' relations through ODL, others elsewhere have seen the light. For instance Brown (2006) posits that new information technologies, and particularly the Internet, are dramatically transforming access to information, are changing the learning and research process. New information technologies have transformed how we search, discover, teach and learn. On the other hand, Restak (2003, p. 57) points out that, within the modern age, we must be able to rapidly process information, function amidst chaotic surroundings, always remain prepared to shift rapidly from one activity to another and redirect attention between competing tasks without losing time. We must take cognisance of the fact that the learning equal face-to-face mentality has been rebuked by Doiron and Asselin (2011) who posit that youth growing up during the past few years have had unique experiences and cultural influences such that they may have developed methods of learning out of step with how we traditionally structure and provide education in situations where access to digital technologies is more common and more deeply penetrated throughout the whole society.

Old boys' network's invisible hand of power that became visible

The old boys' network from conventional universities uses its invisible hand of power to fuel the damaging attitudes towards distance education. This network is too conservative to accept that learning is no longer associated with spoon feeding but that open and distance mode is the new thing [33 staff (55%) and 196 students (69%)]. Some of the substantiating statements are:

> The belief that distance education is part time learning and not full time is putting breaks on quality. They prescribe outmoded business and administrative systems. Politics and priorities in higher education are based on the conventional universities' prescriptions. Same set of people make the rules of the game in higher education and go on to administer the rules as well. Unfortunately they lack the knowledge of open and distance education including its challenges and prospects.

> ODL must contend with the poor reputation created for distance education by the correspondence courses offered by some conventional institutions code named block releases. These are poor quality operations with shoddy learning materials and

minimal student support. They are merely used as cash cows to subsidise on campus operations.

The old boys' network appears to have an invisible hand of power. Power is intimately tied to knowledge, to the discourse of education and learning, and the production of truth, myths or deceptions (Foucault, 1980). To Foucault (1980), power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. The same set of people makes the rules of the game in higher education and go on to administer the rules as well. Unfortunately they lack the knowledge of open and distance education including its challenges and prospects (Minocha, 2009). The truth of the matter is that the old boys must come to grips with the fact and reality that "new learners" (Gapp and Fisher, 2006) need to be better prepared to live and work in a digital world and that educators need to be careful that education does not remain "fixed in monomodal instruction with homogenised lesson plans, curriculum, and pedagogy . . ." (Kellner, 2004, p. 14). As a result, distance education is, "like the practice, scarce, scattered, buried and extremely diverse" (Yates, cited in Perraton 1997). Dodd's (cited in Chiome, 2011a) appeal that the urgency of the governments to seek ways to harness the powers of distance learning which are becoming internationally recognised for higher levels of education seems to have been ignored. This adversely affects dissemination of information which ultimately affect stakeholder' relations in ODL.

Shock and injury resulting from differing constructions of reality

An important finding of the study which appears to be suppressed in open and distance learning contexts is the shock and injury experienced by both students and staff. This is as a result of different constructions of the reality on the ground. These assertions from one part-time academic appear to support this kind of experience:

> *I had delivered one of the best lectures one day basing on my own judgment. I felt at the time that I had given my best and felt that I was succeeding as a distance educator. However, I experienced the shock of my life to hear that the students went to the Regional Director to complain that they were so frustrated by my presentation that they wanted to drop out! I was actually hurt and frustrated that I nearly dropped out of the system myself. So what you may see as a threat to quality may be just another opinion from a different angle. What counted as success for me was seen as dismal failure by the students.*

This important finding of the study which appears to be suppressed in open and distance learning contexts is the shock and injury experienced by both students and staff. This is as a result of different constructions of the reality on the ground. However, one respondent shot down this and reasoned that what you may see as a threat to quality may be just another opinion from a different angle. What counts as success for one person can be seen as dismal failure by another. What is needed in this case is what some respondents in this study called *image building.* Binsardi and Ekwulugo, (2003)'s findings that universities must seek to re-position themselves in order to improve their image and reputation was collaborated in this research in which ODL's image was dealt a severe blow by damaging attitudes. The meaning of marketing has evolved over time but the most enduring theme in these developments has been the centrality of the customer in the decisions of the organisation (Maringe, 2005). Marketing is a term that describes any exchange relationship to ensure that parties in this relationship derive the maximum benefit from the exchange. Institutions however differ in the

extent to which they conceptualise and implement the marketing idea and ODL appears to blame for this deterioration in its image. The product orientation concept adopted by Kotler in Maringe (2005) can minimise the damage. Kotler quoted in Maringe (2005) considers product orientation as being driven by a need to offer the highest quality, performance and innovative features. Universities all over the world pride themselves in being excellent at what they do and in delivering quality products and programmes of the highest standards (Anderson, 2006 and AAU. 2009). Unfortunately, standards for this quality and excellence are usually internally determined and assumed to be what the customers want or need (Fuller, and Smith, 1991; Lomas, 2007 and Maguad, 2010). Lessons from this study point to a paradigm shift in this regard.

Brown's (2006) advice to ODL institutions that they should move away from providing content per se to learners but should focus on coaching learners to find, identify, manipulate and evaluate information and knowledge, to integrate this knowledge in their world of work and life, to solve problems and to communicate this knowledge to others may appear farfetched but is relevant to ODL institutions if they are to claim their rightful place and build permanent stakeholder relations. Learners should be connected and networking in various ways in the digital age. Thus, in this regard, Gogoi and Hazarika (2011)'s advice that the funding authorities may allot a sizeable amount of fund for promoting ODL among people, and that the ODL institutions should also spend a portion of their earning for making the people aware and developing a healthy attitude in them.

Monopolies and oligopolies of knowledge

A major finding of this study and one with the most far reaching consequences for stakeholder engagement is the struggle for knowledge power that has affected ODL quality and building stakeholder relationships through ODL[125 students (44%) and 31 staff (52%)]. It has been seen that knowledge is a critical component of societal interaction. This scenario appears not surprising as Ticoll (2010) noted that the dispersion of political power has matched hand in hand with the dispersion of control over knowledge. The definition and organisation of knowledge in society is a consequence of the distribution of power in that society. Some of the revelations from those that are privy to the debate are:

> *If knowledge is power as is said, then it follows that some forms of knowledge are more powerful than others. It is no accident that the least powerful forms of knowledge are those taught to the least valued groups in society and are those associated with open and distance learning.*

> *In our education system, monopolies and oligopolies of knowledge have been built up to support those on the defensive. To build sustainable stakeholder relations, ODL must move in fast to strengthen the position of those on the offensive. If it fails to win this war, then it is fighting a losing battle. In this case, the quality that you are looking for will always be there but with a question mark.*

To add assault to injury, a student quoted one prominent academic who once publicly declared that:

> *'In Zimbabwe there are only two universities-the University of Zimbabwe and others.'*

Apparently in reality, Zimbabwe had more than a dozen universities when this statement was made by those on the defensive with the power to label and go on to make sure that the label

sticks! It is clear that the people with influence and power tend to define their own knowledge as superior and then go further to institutionalise it in the education system (Foucault, 1980 and Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). They will measure educational quality in terms of this definition. In this way, power and privilege remain within the same social group (Haralambos and Holborn, 2004). This scenario appears not surprising as Ticoll (2010) noted that the dispersion of political power has matched hand in hand with the dispersion of control over knowledge.

This is so because respondents in this study believed that in our education system, monopolies and oligopolies of knowledge have been built up to support those on the defensive. To build sustainable stakeholder relations, ODL must move in fast to strengthen the position of those on the offensive. If it fails to win this war, then it is fighting a losing battle and stakeholder relations will suffer. According to Harvey and Newton (2004, p. 157), quality has "contributed little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience". Negative effects emerge from a strong emphasis on external control and overestimating accountability. In this regard, this might provoke a shift of power from the departments to the institutional level and to government (Newton, cited in Kleijnen, et al, 2011).

The bone of hegemony in respect of knowledge is the exercise of power over what counts as knowledge (Doherty, 2008). It is very well gnawed. The same is true of quality. Quality is taken as a status game in the academia world. Most players will adopt the stance that the superiority of academic values over market values is a given, so that the application of a market-derived methodology to academia will have negative effects – more or less by definition. Cartwright (2007, p. 290) claims that, because of the QA agenda "sickness or pathology" has "befallen" academia. Staying with this confusion of methodology with values, one could equally argue that sociologists, Marxist literary critics and other writers have enjoyed excellent profits from the "theory" business for a couple of generations and, as a result, "sickness or pathology" has befallen the discipline of quality (Doherty, 2008). The most important thing to note is that the quality issue is more than an academic argument about definitions of meaning. There is the question of who gets what from the paymaster's limited pot and why (Doherty, 2008). Paymasters generally expect to gain satisfaction from what they are paying for. In principle, it matters little whether the paymaster (referred to as the stakeholder in this research) is the parent, the employer, the student or the government. The argument is the same, it is the exercise of power on what counts as knowledge and what counts as quality. What people involved in the power struggles fail to appreciate is the fact that they inflict untold shock and injury to both staff and students in open and distance learning. Thus, in distance education, there is need to consider Louis and her colleagues (cited in Hayes, at. al., 2004) who argue that reform proposals over emphasise the structural elements of restructuring and overlook the need to improve the culture, climate and interpersonal relationships in learning institutions which are as critical to the success of any change agenda.

CONCLUSIONS

In view of the changes and possibilities brought on by new markets and new technology, the most suitable educational model for the 21st century must be devised with care and with a keen eye on the processes of the information age. Under modern conditions, the development of a knowledge society rests mainly upon linking economic growth with cognitive growth. In contemporary times, the individuals and communities have access to both formal and informal

stocks of social capital. In the world of antiquity, majority of people counted more on informal stock of social capital like family support and communal networks. Organisations count on stakeholder relations. This is where ODL comes in to utilise technological advances in communication and transportation in order to increasingly help frame and enforce formal laws of sociology and glued scattered communities in building lasting stakeholder relations. However, there is looming threat to this that was unearthed in this study. Suppressed voices of quality in ODL are working as destroyers and inhibitors. In effect, they are silent assassins of long lasting stakeholder relations. Some of the manifestations of these damaging attitudes were seen through the otherness of ODL and its students, the low status accorded to distance education and the belief that learning equals face-to-face teaching. The invisible hand of power from a close knit highly conservative old boys' clique from conventional universities appeared visible in this study. This clique wields monopolies and oligopolies of power. In consequence, factors such as these not only influence the working and learning environment of ODL staff and students but simultaneously become the subject of their study.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Basing on the fore going conclusions, this research proffered the following recommendations:

- The main recommendation of this study is that there is need to revisit and for *reworking the quality puzzle in order to build lasting stakeholder relations in ODL.*
- In order to build lasting stakeholder relations, ODL ought to be a major force in society not only for producing leaders in science and technology, but also for downstream channelling of progressive social, moral, and political values while keeping in perspective temporal realities and spatial constraints.
- Good stakeholder relationships are built up over many day-today interactions – staff at all levels need to be credible, consistent, and share their organisation's objectives.
- **Communication is critical in ODL.** ODL organisations need to communicate their objectives well – internally as well as externally
- **Feedback is critical in ODL.** There is need to conduct real, two-way conversations with stakeholders. There must be feedback, don't just mutely listen.
- There is a need to be transparent, accountable and in touch with your stakeholders' concerns and preferences.
- Building trust with stakeholders makes relationships more productive and fosters partnership working, helping organisations to prioritise and meet their aims.

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